

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN

By Alex Rosenzweig

Excerpts from the Journal of Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, as Recorded in 2302:

SD10204.20:

Les came into my office this morning. He had that *look* on his face. When Les—that's Fleet Admiral Les Rickard, Commander, Star Fleet, for those coming late to the party—has that look, you just know something's up.

Les settled into one of the two chairs on the other side of the desk from mine. He leaned forward, rested his arms on the surface of the desk, and looked straight at me. "We have a situation."

"Oh?" I asked curiously. I assumed it wasn't a huge crisis, 'cause if it were, Les wouldn't be sitting here in my office to discuss it with me.

"J.C.'s going to be standing down as Commander of the 7th Fleet."

I blinked. Of the things I was expecting, well... This was not among them. Oh. For those latecomers again, J.C. is Fleet Captain J.C. Cohen, 7th Fleet Commander, and also—in one of the most unusual situations in the Fleet—Executive Officer aboard the *U.S.S. Accord*. He also served aboard the *Avenger* under my command a bunch of years ago.

"Why?" was my obvious first question.

"I can't discuss that," Les replied. "It's classified, even to you." Les knows that my SECLAR rating is about as high as one can get without being the Star Fleet Commander.

"Okay," says me. "So what does this have to do with me?"

He gave me this level gaze. "We need an experienced hand at the tiller out there."

"Okay," I said again. "I'll check with Personnel and we'll see how we can assign—"

"Not exactly," said Les.

By now I was wondering exactly what was up with this approach. Les isn't one given to this sort of evasiveness. I waited, and he went on.

"You commanded the 7th."

That was true, of course. From January of '88 to September of '94, I'd been the guy in charge, doubling as 7th Fleet Commander and CO of the *Avenger*. I'd rotated out, and was succeeded by Bob Vosseller of the *Challenger*. It wasn't too long after that that Starbase 29 had been attacked and badly damaged, and the 7th had been re-homeported at Starbase 7, where it still was today. Of course, with a mobile fleet (as opposed to one designated to a particular territory), where the homeport was didn't mean so much.

Anyway...

I nodded to Les. "Yes, I did."

And then he let it out. "We'd like you to do it again."

For a moment, I just looked at him. Then I found my voice.

"You're serious."

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why me? Surely there must be some up-and-comers who'd be good choices. Won't they look askance at someone coming back to the job after eight years? What about one of the squadron leaders?" The 7th Fleet was divided into three squadrons, each of which had a lead vessel and a commander.

"Alex, I know you've been...umm...not that involved in the goings-on in the 7th for a while, but trust me when I tell you that there's good reason to do it this way. Most of the ship captains know you and trust you. And with everything that's going on, we think you're the man for the job."

"And my other duties?" I'd been transferred off the *Avenger* and back to Headquarters three years ago because I was needed, or so they told me. And, I have to admit, I'd been settling into both major aspects of the job, and had come to feel I was making a difference. Honestly, I wasn't so sure I wanted to lose that.

"Your troubleshooter role won't change. We're just going to switch your base of operations to Starbase 7. As for the strategic and developmental role, well..." Les paused for a moment. "Chris has agreed to step in until Jerry's ready to fully take that over." Chris is Admiral Chris Wallace, a good officer and certainly able enough. Jerry was new to the General Staff, a commodore who was showing a great deal of promise. What struck me was that Les had already been prepping for this, even before he came to me. I doubted I'd have any kind of choice.

"And my staff?"

"If you want them, and they'd not mind the transfer, they're yours."

That was encouraging news. Over the past few years, Bill Curn and Shralat had become both staffers I relied on and good friends. It'd save me a lot of effort if I wouldn't have to break in new staff. Replacing Rhonda E. Green, who's transferring to the *U.S.S. Flying Fox*, is enough.

"When's this going to happen?" I asked.

"We're not quite ready yet," Les told me. "Fleet Captain Tunis is holding down the fort, but we don't want to call a lot of attention to this."

"And you still can't tell me why."

"Right."

"Ooookay," I said. "Let me know, and I'll start getting things ready here."

"Knew I could count on you," Les said with a smile.

SD10205.25

The word came through the other day. All's a "go". I've been packed for two weeks, but things being what they are, I couldn't say anything. Now they're going to announce the change to the newsnets. Who knows what questions we'll get at that point?

I've been spending time reading up on the current status of the Seventh Fleet. It's quite interesting. Some things have barely changed at all, and others have changed a **lot**. The *Accord's* back out beyond the Storm Line, so getting in touch with J.C. wasn't

going to be an option. I was also expecting a detailed briefing from Ed Tunis to arrive imminently, but things have been delayed, and it likely won't happen before I reach Starbase 7. One thing that caught my attention: Fleet Captain Klufas and a number of her senior officers were yanked off the *Thagard*, and are prepping to be transferred to the *U.S.S. Flying Fox*. The briefing I've gotten so far doesn't explain a thing about why. It seems that there's something up that folks aren't talking about. One surprising thing was who got assigned as Kris' replacement in *Thagard's* center seat: Ty Campbell. Ty's got the scientific and technical background to command a science ship, but he's a maverick, with a known lack of interest in conventional approaches to deep space operations. (I should know; he served on the *Avenger* once.) All I can guess is that Star Fleet has their reasons for what they're doing.

Those reasons, though, remain a mystery. I have been doing some checking, and I'm starting to wonder if I see the hand of Admiral Geoffery Tolwyn in all this. He's a sneaky one, and I must admit, I don't trust him. A few of the missions he sent the *Avenger* on, just after Carlos took over from me—including one that nearly destroyed the ship—seemed just...wrong. I think there's more going on than a lot of the Admiralty realizes. I've had a few rounds of shadow-boxing with him over the last couple of years, but I wonder who, if anyone, will watchdog him with me back out in deep space.

SD10205.27

The announcement was taken a lot more matter-of-factly than I could have hoped. The press seemed a lot more willing to focus on what they used to call the "human interest" angle than on the strategic aspects of the switch. And while I normally don't like to talk about myself, just this once I was willing to do that to keep them from sniffing where they shouldn't.

So I took questions like, "Is *Avenger* going to be the flagship again?" (Nominally, yes); "What will it be like serving on your old ship again?" (While I'll be aboard from time to time, I'll be spending a lot of time either at Starbase 7 or moving around on *Hyperion*, my warpshuttle, or on other ships in the Seventh Fleet); "Why did you take this assignment?" (Star Fleet gave me my orders. I might be an admiral, but I still have to follow 'em); and so on.

Once the questions were done and the newsnets satisfied, I went back to my office to get the last of my things squared away for the trip to Starbase 7. I stood there, taking stock of the office. It didn't feel much like mine anymore, as the ever-efficient support staff had already packed away just about all of my personal effects for transfer to my offices at the starbase. The desk still had to go, but the art was gone, and after spending a couple of years with my *Enterprise*-class and NX-class vessel paintings where I could see them each day, it looked pretty bare without them. A few books were left, including a signed edition of Alagna poetry from the 21st Century, but they'd be put in cases soon enough.

I stopped for a minute, realizing that this was it. My life was about to change again. It would only be for a couple of years, but a couple of years is still nothing to sneeze at. I thought about the last few years and the people I'd met, worked with, shared my life with... Finding Rhonda again had been a lucky break, and she'd served just as well as I'd expected. And we'd gotten to be friends in a way that had never really been able to happen while she'd served under my command aboard the *Avenger*. Bill Coburn and

Shralat had been staffers I'd inherited, but that hadn't prevented them from becoming important to how I did my job.

Working at Headquarters had given me opportunities to operate differently in other areas, too. It really is true that ship command doesn't afford much time for romance. And, admittedly, romance doesn't come my way that often, even under the best of circumstances. At Headquarters, though, it did once, in the person of Lynn Connors, a beautiful woman who worked as a graphic designer for one of the contractors employed by Star Fleet. It didn't last, only running for ten months, but it was intense for me. By the time it ended, I was in love, so in love I would've given her anything, done anything... But she didn't feel the same, when all was said and done. The psych folks tell me that I'll heal from it eventually, and I guess they're right, but I have to admit that I haven't been the same since. They tell me that's normal, too, but I still wonder. I've loved before; why's this so different? Ahh, well... Maybe getting back "in the field" is a good thing. It'll help me finish getting my head screwed back on straight.

I also got a good look at some of the politics of life at Command. Some of it, the gods help me, I actually enjoyed. A lot I could do quite happily without, and as often as not I was very happy to be off doing some troubleshooting assignment or another, rather than dealing with the government and press types. Of course, I'm going to have some of the politics to deal with as a fleet commander, but it'll be at...hmm...a greater distance.

I might not miss the politics, but what I will miss is the people. Not only did I have a lot of freedom to deal with many very good officers all around the Fleet, but I had the opportunity to interact with the civilian sector in ways that I hadn't in a lot of years. It was...refreshing. I even got to spend some time with the Fleet Marines and Marine liaisons, which is comparatively rare in the Exploration Command. I got to be rather good friends with a few of them, notably Captain Susan Fugate, a Support Command liaison. I also got to spend a bit more time with Commodore Joan Pierce, whom I'd met when she was serving aboard the survey cruiser *Questar*. Now she's on the *Maat*, a heavy cruiser. Good ship, too.

Well, I guess I'd best get to wrapping things up. It's almost time to go...

SD10205.29

I'm recording this aboard the *Excelsior*, which is bringing me out to Starbase 7 since it's roughly on the way to their next assignment and *Hyperion* is needed to bring other materials out there. I had dinner with Captain Sulu last night, and we chatted about everything under the suns, it seemed, from current events to the adventures we'd both had as Star Fleet officers to mutual friends, and, inevitably, to James T. Kirk.

Hikaru's about eight years older than I am, and he served on the *Enterprise* during that five-year mission that captured the imaginations of half the population of the Federation, it sometimes seems. His loyalty to James Kirk kept him aboard the *Enterprise* a lot longer than was good for his career, but when he finally accepted command of the *Excelsior*, it was to become the master of the Fleet's newest and most ambitious front-line starship. He's on his third tour as CO now, and for the first time, he's working with a number of much younger officers. Especially with Pavel Chekov having moved on to his own command, only Janice Rand was left of the crew from the *Enterprise*, and only Rand and Chief Engineer

Assaad were among the crew who had come of age in the Fleet before the major political shifts which had marked the last decade or so. He commented about how odd it felt to be an “elder statesman” in the environment of the Fleet today. I have to admit, doing what I do these days, I’ve begun to notice that myself. So many of the officers with whom I’m dealing are seeming younger and younger. Well, all I can do is keep trying to learn from everything and everyone, so I can never turn into some “antique”.

Actually, Hikaru said something very similar. I do have to admit, I’m not surprised.

Still, there’s always a balance between what we can learn and what we can teach, and I figure that I’ve been in this outfit long enough to be able to do both. And the number of commanding officers and command crews that served with me suggests that I might have done a halfway decent job. I can but hope, because commanding the 7th Fleet will put me back into a role to be doing it again.

SD10205.31

The ride to Starbase 7 was an uneventful one, and only took a couple of days. When we got there, I saw the *Justice* in planetary orbit. That was good, ‘cause it meant that I could get my briefing from Ed in person. The one he’d sent by subspace had been a good start, but there were issues I didn’t want to discuss over a comm-channel, issues like the fact that the exploratory cruiser *U.S.S. IDIC* was missing and presumed lost and that the escort *U.S.S. Niagara* was overdue for transfer to the 7th Fleet. There was also the question of whether the *U.S.S. Inferno* would be coming to the 7th at all.

My office and quarters, it turned out, were in the orbital facility, a big spacedock very similar to TerraMain. The *Excelsior* matched orbits and my effects were beamed over. Unfortunately, the ship’s mission beckoned and Captain Sulu could not tarry. I was also informed that Fleet Captain Tunis was already champing at the bit to get me brought up to speed. (I had to chuckle at that, and at the “get your butt out here and relieve me!” message he had sent just before I left.) So I had just enough time to bid Hikaru and his officers goodbye and thank them for their hospitality, and I was beamed to the spacedock. *Excelsior* was back on course moments later, leaving me wondering if I’d actually become one of those admirals who gets in the way of the line personnel trying to do the real work. Yikes! Sobering thought, that.

After confirming that the right yeoman had charge of my stuff, I let Ed know that I was available. He and I sat across from each other in the conference room adjoining my office less than twenty minutes later.

Once the pleasantries were out of the way, Ed got serious. “Alex,” he said, “just what the heck is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” I wasn’t being disingenuous. I wanted to know how things looked from his point-of-view.

“There are rumors, Alex. All sorts of back-channel stuff about why J.C. stood down and what else is going on. Can you shed any light on it?”

“Not about J.C.,” I answered truthfully. “I’m told it’s a top-level classification. Les wouldn’t discuss it.”

“What about Admiral Tolwyn having it in for Carlos?”

“I’m not sure about that. I’ll say this much: I don’t trust that guy. And after guys like Cartwright and Drake, I pay attention to those instincts.”

Ed nodded. “I don’t trust him much, either, but I also don’t get where he’s coming from. He seems too threat-happy for me.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He does tend to see things always lurking in the shadows.”

“And there are a lot of shadows in space,” Ed rejoined with a chuckle.

“Yup.”

With us both in agreement that Geoffery Tolwyn bore watching, we moved on to some of the more mundane aspects of the briefing. The Seventh Fleet was still divided into three squadrons, with Ed, Fleet Captain Gary Ensey, and Commander Lamar Barrett as the squadron commanders. Squadron 3 was the smallest, and 1 was still the biggest of them, fully two-thirds of the fleet. The reports were showing that the squadrons were all operating normally, but recent events, including J.C.’s abrupt departure, had the COs concerned. I made a note to send out a mission update to the fleet, to at least alleviate some of those fears. No, we’re not at war, nothing radical’s going on, etc., etc., etc.

The missing *IDIC* was a major concern, though. As a long-range exploratory cruiser, she was normally expected to be away for months at a time, but when she hadn’t been heard from in over six months, Fleet Ops got worried. Ships normally operating in the areas in the direction from which the *IDIC* had last been heard were keeping sensors peeled, but without result so far. In another month or two, a search mission would be dispatched.

Ed had another concern, as well. “Do we know anything at all about why the *Flying Fox* is being prepped to transfer to the Seventh?”

“All I know is that it’s classified, and that Tolwyn isn’t behind it. At first I thought that she might be a replacement for *IDIC*, in expectation of that ship being declared lost, but *Fox* is a battlecruiser, and *IDIC*’s an exploratory cruiser. It doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe they think we need to beef up the tactical capabilities?”

“That doesn’t make much sense, though.” I went back over the types of ships we have in the Seventh: dreadnoughts, supercarriers, heavy and light cruisers, several scouts, a couple of frigates, destroyers... Granted, having a battlecruiser wouldn’t exactly hurt, but it wasn’t like we didn’t have plenty of tactical capability. “Ah, well... Perhaps Kris—” That’s Kris Klufas, slated to be the *Fox*’s CO. “—will be able to tell us more soon.”

Ed nodded, and we got back down to the business of making me fully aware of the rest of the status of the Seventh Fleet. In most cases, I’d been keeping track of things, anyway—many of the folks in the Seventh Fleet being my friends, after all—so it didn’t take that long. Anything else I needed to know, I’d be able to find out from the logs in fairly short order.

We were getting close to the end of the briefing when a klaxon started sounding. The training kicked in, and both Ed and I were on our feet in an instant. My finger was on the ‘com switch. “Dock Control, this is Rosenzweig. What’s going on?”

“Admiral, hold please,” the reply came. “There’s been an accident.”

Accident??? “Standing by.” Ed and I exchanged looks.

A moment later, the voice from Dock Control came back. "Sorry for the delay, Admiral. A service craft got out of control and smashed into the bridge of the *Timocuan*."

The *Timocuan* was a heavy carrier in dock for servicing at the base. "Were there any casualties?" I asked.

"Four dead, sir. Three engineers working on equipment up there, and the pilot."

"We're coming up there." I tapped off the 'com, and Ed and I were out the door and headed for the control center. When we got there, I immediately noticed Commodore Threll A'von. Since the base commander had been in his office on the surface, he must have high-tailed it up to the dock the minute he got word of what had happened. With Ed just a step behind me, I headed over to talk to him.

"I want to know *exactly* what happened," Threll was saying tersely, the natural sibillance lent to his voice from his Andorian heritage giving him an air of even greater intensity than he might otherwise have had.

"We're not sure yet," an Ops officer (to judge by her uniform) told him, "but—"

Threll cut her off. "Then find *out*."

"Yes, sir." The officer headed back to a workstation, and Threll, apparently hearing us approach, turned around.

"Sorry to have something like this happen your first day here, Admiral. I assure you, our dock rules have not fallen apart since you commanded *Avenger*."

"I understand," I assured Threll. "We all have bad days."

"I just cannot believe a bee pilot would let the craft get out of control like that, and that the emergency safety overrides didn't cut in."

"Commodore," the Ops officer whom Threll had been talking to before interjected, "I think I know what happened to the overrides." Suddenly, all eyes were on her. "The comm-array went down. There weren't any telemetry links between the bee and Control. So when things got messed up on the bee, we couldn't step in."

"So," Ed interjected, "the work bee malfunctioned and the data link was severed."

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any information about what went wrong aboard the bee?"

"Preliminary reports, Captain."

"Is there any sense that they could be linked in any way?" Ed continued. "I mean, are the two systems tied together?"

"I'm not sure I'm following, sir," the Ops officer said.

"What's the likelihood," I asked, "of these two malfunctions happening simultaneously, under normal circumstances? Or, more to the point, could a malfunction of the kind that the bee just suffered either cause or be caused by a failure in the comm-array?"

The officer thought for a moment. "No, they shouldn't be, at least based on the data we have about what went wrong." She paused again, thinking. "Come to think of it, there shouldn't be anything that would tie into either data or voice-comm enough to blow them out, except a total power failure."

"Let's go back to that odds question for a second." Threll was thinking, too, it seemed. "How likely *is* it for two failures of the kind we're looking at to happen at the same time?"

"Commodore, these are very reliable systems. That kind of failure in either one of them would be unusual. That kind of failure

in both..." She just shook her head. "I'd have a hard time believing it."

"Where's the bee now?" Ed asked.

"Pulled into a service bay and in isolation pending investigation," the Ops officer said.

"Get a team in there and find out what happened and why," Threll ordered.

The Ops officer returned to her station and started giving instructions into her 'com. Threll, Ed, and I exchanged glances. At that point, I realized that there just wasn't much more I could do hanging around in the control center. Ironically enough, I was probably distracting the personnel there, too. It had taken a long time, after *Avenger* (and HQ, really, too), to get used to the fact that most Star Fleet officers simply weren't used to dealing with a four-star admiral wandering up to their workstation and asking what they're doing. Once I finally *did* get used to it, I tried to pay attention to when those situations arose. And this was one of them.

SD10205.31 (Entry 2):

Ed and I went back to my office, but while we went on with wrapping up the status briefing, my mind was still on the mystery of that work bee. Something just wasn't adding up. Ed noticed. "Your mind's not on this," he said.

Busted!

I had to admit he was right.

"Something's not adding up, but I haven't placed it yet," I told him, "and I can't help but think there's something important in what I haven't figured out."

"You're thinking like a science officer," he teased. Considering that I was one once, that wasn't a huge surprise, and I said so. He chuckled amusedly.

"Well, we're pretty much done here, anyway. There's not really much more I can tell you that's not in the reports." So let's see if we can help solve a mystery."

We tied in the terminal to the service bay to get a look at the engineering team's progress. It seemed to be going slowly. And when we downloaded the data they'd entered into the database already, it was clear why. Something was giving off some pretty bizarre readings, and the team was in no hurry to start pulling things apart without having some idea of what they were dealing with. I couldn't blame them. At the very least, it was starting to seem like there might be a bit more involved than a simple equipment malfunction.

But... The more I looked at the readings, the more something was echoing in the back of my mind. Something I'd read about a long time ago...

And then I sat bolt upright in the chair. Ed stared at me. "What?"

I tapped the 'com. "Patch me through to the team in Service Bay 6." The communications officer seemed confused, but followed orders. When the technicians responded, I wasted no time. "Have you opened up the craft yet?"

"Not yet, sir," was the reply.

"Then don't. And get somebody from Biology down there."

"Biology???" I could hear the tech's confusion even through the 'com, but he confirmed that he'd comply.

"Very good. I'll be down there shortly."

"Yes, sir." The tech signed off, but I could tell that he was still highly confused. His confusion was mirrored perfectly on Ed's face, as my senior squadron commander stared at me, eyes wide. I shifted the terminal screen around so he could see it, too, and called up the history files. It took a moment, but then I found what I was looking for: the logs of the *Enterprise*, NX-01. Near the end of their first year in space, they had encountered an unusual life-form that had gotten onto the ship from a Kreetassan vessel. The records of that encounter contained readings that looked startlingly similar to the readings the team studying the work bee in Service Bay 6 had been getting, and I had a feeling about it...

When Ed finished looking at the information, he looked back up at me. "Y'think it's the same kind of creature?" I wasn't sure, but I was going to find out.

"Coming with me?" I asked him.

"Sure am," he replied.

So we copied the files into a tricorder and high-tailed it down to the service bay.

When we got there, we were met by the technical team, as well as by an ensign from Sciences. She introduced herself as Ensign Borstel, from the biology lab. I gave her a quick briefing and showed her the files I'd been able to locate from the old records. Her eyes widened fascinatedly and she looked at me. "Sir, do you think it's actually the species the *Enterprise* encountered?"

I honestly wasn't sure, and told her so. But I also told her that the similarities were just too great to dismiss out of hand. I also stole a strategy from Malcolm Reed and ordered security to set up a few portable force field projectors and make sure that they brought down a universal translator, as well. When that was done, we were finally ready to let the techs open the access hatches.

And as I suspected, the bee's equipment bay was filled with a mass of pulsing, writhing white goo.

The techs jumped back, and looked about ready to slam the hatch shut. "Wait!" I shouted. A moment later, the bay filled with a high-pitched, almost electronic sounding ululation. I grabbed the universal translator and a tricorder, and synched them together, since the creature's language was more mathematics than tone. At first, the screen on the tricorder displayed just gibberish, but after a few seconds, it began resolving into words. A few seconds more, and the words themselves became intelligible. "Where is... this element?" The translator was clearly still wrestling with the creature's unusual sense of self, both separate and part of a whole, from what I knew about the organism.

"You're at a Federation starbase," I said. The translator rendered my words back into the being's language.

"Starbase...?" came the question back. "This element was on a ship, and now on a smaller ship, now in here."

"And in here is a part of a starbase." I was trying to keep things simple. While the creature as a whole understood space flight, there was no guarantee that this small piece of it did.

"They didn't say anything about a starbase," the creature said. Okay, it did understand that much.

"Who?" I asked.

"The ones who offered to show me space again."

"Do you know who they are?"

"They...did not tell their designations," the creature answered.

I looked at Ed. This wasn't good. It seemed that someone or something had gotten the creature to put a part of itself onto a ship, by offering to "show it space". Apparently, they decided they weren't interested in playing tour guide anymore, and dumped the creature in orbit of the base. It probably latched onto the first thing it encountered, which was the work bee.

When I outlined my idea to Ed and Ensign Borstel, they both nodded somberly.

"And this creature probably had no idea what was going on," Borstel commented. "I'd like to get my hands on whoever was that heartless."

"Maybe we can," I said.

They both looked at me. The ideas were percolating in my head, and it was fast occurring to me that in my new role, I was in a better position to make them happen. I wondered if Ed was realizing where I was going...but only for a moment.

"Detail a ship to hunt them down?" he asked.

"Yup," I answered, and was rewarded with a smile of agreement. "And potentially another to bring our friend here home."

I was going over the 7th Fleet's roster in my head, working out which ships were on which assignments, and who'd be free to take a new assignment. "*Albany*," I said. "They can be detailed to run our friend here back to its homeworld." *Albany* was a scout, well-suited for such a mission.

"We need somebody to do the investigation to find out who took it, too," Ed reminded me. I'd not forgotten, though.

"*Sun Tzu*. Fleet Captain Wolf's up to it, yes?"

"I'd say so," Ed replied.

"Then let's make it happen."

And even as I said it, I could feel the old instincts kicking back in. It may have been almost eight years since I'd done this, but the memory was still sharp. It was at that moment that I realized that, yes, I'd still be able to do it. In a way, it was like coming home, at least for a little while.

I turned back to the creature, which had flowed partly out of the bee's equipment bay and was now perched partly atop the craft. "We are going to help you get home. Is that all right?"

"Yes," the creature replied. "But..." It stopped.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Will...this element see more of space?"

I had to chuckle, just a little. Even in something as "alien" as this entity, the call to see new things was strong. "I think that can be arranged."

"This element would be...grateful." Now that was a surprise. I really didn't expect this being to understand that concept. So either I'd underestimated it, the universal translator was fudging, or the creature had picked up the idea without fully getting it. And in the end, it really didn't matter which it was.

"You're welcome," I told it. "Wait here, all right? When a ship is ready, we'll come and get you."

There was a pause, and then the being said, "All right." I realized it had taken a moment or two for it to understand the colloquialism, but that, too, was okay.

I thanked the creature for being patient, and then switched off the translator. Turning to Borstel, I asked her to continue talking to the creature, so we could continue learn as much as possible while it was our guest. That taken care of, Ed and I went back to my office. As we settled back down, I tapped on the intercom and advised Commodore Threll of what we'd discovered. The star-

base commander was startled at first, but quickly told me that we'd have his full cooperation in the search for the ship that had brought the creature to Starbase 7. I asked him to have an Ops officer pull the records of all ships that had visited the base in the past week. With Threll and his people set to their task, I cut the orders to the *Albany* and *Sun Tzu*. The acknowledgements came back quickly, with even a, "Just like old times, eh?" quip from Commodore Burke aboard *Albany*. (Donna had been out there a long time, going back to when I commanded the 7th Fleet the first time.) Her response brought a smile to my face, prompting Ed to wonder what she'd said. What the heck? I shared it with him. He grinned; he'd been around since the old days, too.

SD10206.01:

In the short-term, at least, things have settled down a bit. The *Albany* is en route to the starbase, and will be picking up the creature for the trip back to its homeworld. Ensign Borstel has continued talking to the creature, and tells me that, in its own way, it's very chatty. It might perceive the universe in very different ways from the standard humanoid norm, but one thing it does share with us is a great curiosity. Thankfully, the Sato-T'Pol translation algorithms have been improved a lot since they were first developed back on the old *Enterprise*, and communication is a great deal easier as a result.

On the other front, Ed and I have been coordinating with Fleet Captain Wolf and Starbase Operations and Security to sort out where the ship that initially picked up the alien came from, and where it's gone to. This may take some time, because nearly fifty ships were in the area during the window of time when the creature could have been...dropped off. Wolf and his crew have been detailed to coordinate with Threll and *his* staff, following up leads. While what was done might not qualify strictly as kidnapping, it certainly feels a lot like it, and dumping a passenger that doesn't fully understand what's going on after having taken de facto responsibility for that passenger certainly wasn't exactly considered "good conduct".

The official change of command took place at 1400 hours this afternoon. Ed seemed almost relieved as he went back to the *Justice* with a mission to take him out toward Klingon space. As for me, I'm finally starting to settle in and feel like I can make a difference out here. Maybe it's just for a couple of years, but it'll be an *interesting* couple of years. And I'm looking forward to seeing what the future will bring.

End Excerpts

-----END-----